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China's Military Modernization: Determining the Level of Threat

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Departments of the Army or Navy.

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Abstract

U.S. military planners have a wide range of views concerning the threat posed by China. It is difficult to determine the true extent of this threat by listening to Chinese rhetoric that is often vague or misleading. Conversely, a great deal of insight concerning the Chinese military and the threat it poses can be gained by focusing on their military modernization programs. As opposed to government rhetoric, the modernization process and its resultant capabilities, provide the warplanner with a long term, factual picture of the threat against which U.S. forces must be prepared to defend.

The purpose of this paper is to develop an accurate assessment of the threat posed by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) through an analysis of their military modernization program. This paper also examines U.S. strategy considerations which may be considered in order to counter Chinese capabilities and threats.

Thesis

Americans have wide ranging opinions concerning the level of threat posed by China and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). Their estimates range from viewing China as posing little or no threat to U.S. interests, either now or in the foreseeable future, to a China which is already a significant threat and will become a regional peer competitor within the next ten to twenty years. This variance is in large part due to decades of intentional Chinese obfuscation of their foreign and military policy.

Despite this complicating factor, a great deal of insight concerning the Chinese military can be gained by focusing on their military modernization programs rather than their rhetoric, i.e., paying more attention to capabilities and less to current intentions. While Chinese rhetoric may change significantly based on day-to-day events (such as the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade), the modernization process and its resultant capabilities provide the warplanner with a long term, factual picture of the threat against which U.S. forces must be prepared to defend.

The purpose of this paper is to develop an accurate assessment of the threat posed by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) through an analysis of their military modernization program. This paper also examines U.S. strategy considerations that may be considered by the CINC's planning staff, or other interested parties, in order to counter Chinese capabilities and threats.

Chinese Goals and Strategies

Chinese politics and the PLA are tightly linked. Military leaders actively participate in the formulation of national strategic decisions.¹ It is therefore necessary to

gain an understanding of the basic tenants of Chinese national strategy in order to understand China's military intentions and modernization efforts.

"China's primary national goal is to become a strong, unified, and wealthy nation that is respected as a great power in the world and as the preeminent power in Asia."² Key to any country gaining respect and power is dominance of its own geographic region. It has become clear to the Chinese that in order to attain this goal they must develop a military that is capable of not only dominating the landmass of China but also the space beyond their shores. They intend to accomplish this in two phases.³ In the first phase the Chinese intend to control the area within what they describe as the first island chain. This chain of islands includes the Aleutians, Kuriles, Ryukyus, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the Greater Sunda Islands.⁴ In the second phase of their plan, the Chinese intend to develop the capability to control the area within the second island chain. This area includes the Bonins, Guam, Marianas and Palau Islands.⁵ If the Chinese are able to attain this goal, they will replace the United States as the dominant power in the Asian region.⁶

The means that the Chinese will use to attain their goals will be either the threat or actual use of military power. However, the Chinese have learned a valuable lesson from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). Economics and military power must evolve hand in hand. A country with a weak economy that attempts to build a military of the sophistication required to compete in today's high-tech environment is doomed to failure. Therefore, the Chinese have placed the goal of building their economic power in a position preeminent to the goal of modernizing their military. They intend to use their

economic power to build a capable and technically sophisticated military which they will then use to attain their remaining goals.

U.S. Strategy Considerations: With the U.S. withdrawal from the Philippines, China now sees itself as the ascendant power in the region and the U.S. as a power that is declining.⁷ Planners should ensure that U.S. presence missions within the first and second island chains are emphasized. Achieving control over Taiwan is a crucial first step in China's dominance over the two island chains. It is clear that the Chinese consider Taiwan the first battle in a protracted war leading to regional hegemony.

Countering moves by the Chinese to take Taiwan are crucial. Developing a deterrence package that combines the threat of U.S. political, economic and military sanctions could provide the synergistic punch required to avert Chinese aggression towards Taiwan. The Chinese must understand that the ramifications of taking Taiwan by force will be severe and cause more damage to Chinese development than it is worth.

As a counter-point, planners need to keep in mind that China should not be pushed into a corner from which it cannot escape. If China ever perceives that it is in a position of continuing decline or even relative decline (as compared to its current growth), its leaders may decide that the long term negative consequences of taking Taiwan by force are worth the short term prestige and nationalism that would be gained. If the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) should ever be forced to choose between an FSU-style breakup of China and taking military action against Taiwan (in order to gain public support), they will almost certainly attack Taiwan.

Modernization of Chinese Doctrine

The development of modern Chinese military doctrine began in the late 1920s when Mao Zedong realized that an innovative doctrine was required in order for the Chinese Communists to be successful against a stronger and better equipped Nationalist Chinese force. This led to the development of the People's War doctrine which focused PLA efforts on a comprehensive strategy which traded space for time, won the hearts and minds of the Chinese people, and then used the Chinese masses to overpower the enemy. This doctrine continued to dominate Chinese military thinking long after the defeat of the Nationalists in 1949. During the period from the late 1940s until the 1970s, China saw their primary external threats as emanating from Taiwan, Japan, the U.S. and Russia. Each of these countries had forces that were technically superior to those of the PLA. Therefore, as in the war with the Nationalists, the defense of China was out of necessity, based on the People's War doctrine.

China detonated its first nuclear weapon in 1964. As their nuclear arsenal grew the Chinese began to achieve a state of military readiness that would provide for a credible forward defense. The growing nuclear program combined with a number of other factors in the 1970s to encourage the PLA to begin to migrate away from the People's War doctrine.

"The PRC's abandonment of People's War doctrine was necessitated for a number of important reasons: the changing international environment; China's threat perception vis-à-vis the USSR and the United States; China's analysis of its own changing strategic interests; and Mao's death in 1976. The fury of the Cultural Revolution was dissipating by 1978; Chinese cities were emerging as important centers of industrial activity and communications. In the event of a major war, the Chinese government could no longer afford to abandon these, as was emphasized under the People's War doctrine."⁸

A new doctrine was called for to defend against attacks on the increasingly important and rapidly growing Chinese urban centers. The new doctrine was termed People's War Under Modern Conditions (PWUMC). This new doctrine emphasized strategy, tactics, incorporation of new technology, C4I, force projection, logistics, rapid response and combined arms training.⁹

The most recent military doctrine developed by the Chinese has its genesis in the Gulf War. The solid defeat of Iraqi forces by the U.S.-led coalition clearly demonstrated to the Chinese that they were not prepared to fight a war in the high-technology environment created by U.S. forces. Five key lessons were learned by the Chinese from their review of the war: electronic warfare is decisive, high-tech weaponry is the key to future wars, air and naval power are critical, capability is measured by rapid response and deployment, and logistics are as important as strength.¹⁰ The Chinese changed their doctrine as an initial step towards developing these capabilities. This latest phase in Chinese doctrinal development has been labeled Warfare Under High Tech Conditions (WUHTC)¹¹. While similar to PWUMC in some respects, WUHTC differs significantly in one crucial area: it changes the focus of Chinese doctrine from a low-tech, manpower intensive form of warfare to a form that is high-tech and weapons intensive.

U.S. Strategy Considerations: The planner should note that most major Chinese developments in doctrine have not been the result of innovation or leading edge thinking, but instead, a reaction to the evolving military environment. Conversely, the United States is often at the forefront of doctrinal development. The trend of Chinese doctrine generally following in the footsteps of U.S. doctrine will probably continue primarily due to the fact that high tech weaponry is currently driving most leading edge doctrine (digital

division, netcentric warfare, etc.). As a leader in high-tech weapon systems the U.S. will develop new doctrine to support this equipment. China will most likely adopt this new doctrine as their equipment technology advances. U.S. planners should not expect an RMA in Chinese military doctrine.

Understanding that the Chinese are followers in doctrinal development gives the U.S. several advantages. First, if the warplanner understands that Chinese doctrine is very similar to U.S. doctrine (albeit perhaps a generation removed) he or she should have a much better understanding as to how the Chinese will react in any given situation. Secondly, being a follower as opposed to an innovator of doctrine leaves the Chinese vulnerable to an RMA in the area of doctrine. A Chinese force that fights with predictable doctrine may be caught off-guard by a precisely aimed change in U.S. doctrine.

Modernization of Chinese Forces

Although military modernization has been subordinated to economic concerns, the Chinese are providing strong financial support to the military. "China's defence expenditure had [*sic*] increased by more than 10% every year for more than eight years in a row. This year's [1999] rate of annual increase was about 11% which accounted for approximately 9% of the total fiscal spending."¹² The Chinese understand that keeping pace with modern developments is essential for maintaining a credible military, and they are ensuring that the military is financed accordingly.

"China's security strategy strives to enhance the military, political and economic components of national power."¹³

“China’s National Defense Law identifies six military tasks that underlie this objective:

- (1) Modernize the People’s Liberation Army (PLA);
- (2) Defend China’s territorial sovereignty;
- (3) Deter and resist aggression by global and regional hegemons;
- (4) Support the Party’s reunification policies;
- (5) Ensure domestic security and stability;
- (6) Support the national economic modernization program”¹⁴

Placing modernization of the PLA as their first priority, even above the task of defending of China, clearly demonstrates the emphasis that China places on modernization. It also is an indication of the risk that the Chinese are willing to assume during a period that they see as relatively free from external threats.

In terms of overall modernization of their forces, the Chinese are attacking the problem on a number of fronts:

“... the PLA has undertaken a long-term military modernization program which currently is focused on reducing overall size of the force by some 500,000 personnel; equipping it with more modern weapons, either acquired from abroad or produced domestically; and, developing a better educated and technologically skilled force, both in officer and enlisted ranks. To support and sustain these forces, China is trying to establish a more effective national mobilization system for shifting the military, government, and industry from peacetime to war footing.”¹⁵

The Chinese are serious about modernizing their armed forces to include acquiring the high tech weapons required by their WUHTC doctrine. The outcome will undoubtedly be a PLA that is smaller but more capable than their current force.

U.S. Strategy Considerations: Placing force modernization above national defense is a bold move intended by the Chinese to make major advances in military capability in a relatively short time.¹⁶ If left unchecked and combined with the synergistic effect of China’s strong economic growth, the Chinese modernization effort could prove to be a major step toward achieving their goal of becoming regional hegemon. Planners should give some thought as to how long the United States is willing

to permit China to devote a large portion of their budget to modernization efforts. Would it be more beneficial to U.S. interests to present the Chinese with a moderate level of threat? Would this slow their modernization program by forcing them to spend more on the readiness of their current forces? Would it keep them off balance just enough to prevent a total force modernization effort?

A U.S. strategy devised to provide a moderate level of threat to the Chinese obviously raises a number of serious political and military issues. Among these, is determining just how much pressure the U.S. could place on the Chinese without the situation developing into a conflict. This strategy would obviously increase risk to U.S. forces, but there may be substantial benefits that make the increased risk acceptable. First, as previously mentioned, it could act to slow Chinese modernization efforts, but additionally the threat could be focused to send a clear signal to the Chinese that the United States will not permit unchecked Chinese expansion in the first island chain. This could be especially important to Taiwan and other nations within the region that fear China may be gaining ground in its efforts to become the regional hegemon.

PLA Army Modernization

The PLA Army has been negatively affected by the implementation of the WUHTC doctrine which emphasizes high technology warfare. The demand for high-tech equipment tends to drain funding away from the Army in order to provide it for sophisticated aircraft, ships and missiles for the Air Force and Navy.¹⁷ Therefore, most modernization efforts in the Army have been directed toward improving cost efficiency, reorganizing units, and improving training.

China's Army contains approximately 1.8 million soldiers.¹⁸ This number has been reduced from a figure of 2.1 million in 1997.¹⁹ The Army is divided geographically into seven military regions and 24 Group Armies.²⁰ Each of these Group Armies is equivalent to a U.S. corps.²¹ The Group Armies contain a total of 73 infantry divisions, 9 main force divisions, and 5 artillery divisions²² "Most of China's 24 Group Armies now include "rapid deployment" units. There is also a force of some 5,000 Marines. These forces are equipped with the PLA's most modern weapons and are at the leading edge of training reform"²³

The general trend for the Army appears to be downsizing, greater mobility and some emphasis on combined arms training.²⁴ As mentioned earlier, equipment modernization within the Army itself is progressing very slowly. While the amount of equipment on hand is large, most of it is old technology and difficult to maintain.

U.S. Strategy Considerations: The quality of equipment and readiness of the PLA Army is poor except in a small number of rapid deployment units. These elite units pose little threat to U.S. forces. This is primarily due to their being distributed across a vast country and the relative inability of the Chinese to move and maneuver them. Even Taiwan is relatively safe from the Chinese Army unless Taiwan is first attacked by naval and air forces.

The poor readiness of the Chinese Army could change significantly provided funding becomes available through the growing Chinese economy. However, building a PLA that could provide for more than homeland defense will be an arduous process spanning at least several decades.

PLA Navy (PLAN) Modernization

China's Navy has historically been a brown water navy assigned the primary mission of coastal defense. "In recent years, the PLAN's maritime mission has evolved from a role of static coastal defense to one of "active off-shore defense."²⁵ The new mission of the PLAN is to secure the Chinese border out to the 200-mile Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ).²⁶ The Chinese intend to continue expansion of the PLAN's capabilities with the goal of attaining the status of a two ocean (Pacific and Indian) Navy by the year 2035.²⁷ The priority currently given to modernization of the PLAN by the Chinese Communist Military Committee is representative of the Chinese realization that force projection will be required in order to attain China's strategic goals.

"The PLAN is manned by approximately 268,000 officers and men, including 28,000 coastal-defense forces, 25,000 naval air forces, and some 7,000 marines."²⁸ The surface navy has over 400 fast attack missile, patrol and torpedo boats; the submarine force over 60 submarines; and the air arm over 700 attack aircraft.²⁹ These are impressive numbers by any standard, but as with the Army, the devil is in the details. Of the 400 surface ships, only about 50 units are considered major combatants by Western standards, and of the 60 submarines and 700 attack aircraft, most are two or three generations behind those of the world's first line navies.³⁰

However, based on the new missions and priorities given to the PLAN, the force is modernizing.

"The PLAN's drive for modernization has been most dramatically reflected in its ongoing development of the FB-7 bomber, new-generation conventional and nuclear-powered attack and ballistic missile submarines, acquisition of Russian-built Kilo-class diesel submarines, and the planned acquisition of Russian-built Sovremenny guided-missile destroyers. The PLAN also has relied heavily on Russian training for the officers and enlisted personnel who will man these units."³¹

The PLAN continues to deploy a number of sophisticated sea-skimming missiles based on either the Russian Styx or French Exocet technologies.³² “These missiles give the PLAN the capability to conduct extended-range antishipping strikes from air and surface units, as well as from coastal-defense sites.”³³

The long-range modernization of the PLAN consists of three phases: decommissioning outdated surface ships, acquiring advanced Western technology, and improving training.³⁴ In addition, the PLAN is showing interest in acquiring an aircraft carrier.³⁵ This would be a major step toward being able to provide the power projection that will be required to accomplish their island-chain goals. However, there is considerable doubt as to the capability of the Chinese to operate and maintain such a complex ship.

U.S. Strategy Considerations: The far reaching effects which will be brought about by the PLAN’s change in mission and resulting higher levels of funding must not be overlooked by U.S planners. While the PLAN is currently in the early stages of becoming a green water navy, it is on its way to becoming, at a minimum, a navy second only to those of the major Western powers. It appears that this transformation could occur as early as 2020.

Planners should focus on determining the effect that a strong second-class Chinese Navy will have on the balance of power in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Is it possible that a second-class navy, operating within the waters of the first island chain, would be good enough to attain the Chinese goal of hegemony within that region?

The lessons learned by the British in the Falkland Islands conflict should be carefully considered in U.S. naval warplanning for China. A small second-class navy

operating with short SLOCs and using small numbers of carefully chosen high-tech weapons can be extremely effective against a larger, better-equipped navy. Chinese submarines, especially the four recently acquired Russian Kilos, undoubtedly play a major role in Chinese warplans and pose a difficult defensive problem for any navy. The U.S. Navy is a prime target for an asymmetrical response by a smaller less powerful force like the PLAN.

U.S. planners should also give a great deal of thought to the second and third level effects/outcomes of such battles. If the Chinese were able to sink a carrier or capital ship in a battle over Taiwan, what would be the best U.S. course of action? It is almost certain that the people of the United States would demand immediate and massive retaliation, but would it be wise to remain engaged? Would it be better to channel our retaliation through economic and political means? If we fight, would escalation become inevitable? Are the rewards of U.S. regional dominance worth the risks? Answering these questions as completely as possible now may permit the U.S. to avoid a dangerous situation in the future.

Modernization of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF)

The PLAAF is a large air force in terms of numbers. It has about 380,000 personnel and 4,500 fighter aircraft.³⁶ Like the PLAN, these numbers are impressive until the details are considered. The PLAAF suffers many of the same problems as the PLA Army. Much of the equipment is second and third generation that is difficult to maintain and is inherently inferior to the high-tech weapons of the United States. In fact, the PLAAF expects to reduce its number of obsolescent fighters by about 3,500 aircraft as part of its modernization program.³⁷

China has been only minimally successful in its attempt to build indigenous high-tech aircraft. This has left it reliant upon arrangements with Russia and Western companies, which build, or participate in joint ventures to build, modern Chinese aircraft. However, this only solves part of the Chinese problem. Maintenance of high-tech aircraft like the Russian produced Su-27s has proven extremely difficult for the Chinese.³⁸ Pilot training is also a major problem. Even after extensive training in Russia, the Chinese pilots designated to fly newly purchased Su-27s were so unskilled that Russian pilots had to deliver the planes to Chinese bases.³⁹

The PLAAF is deficient in a number of crucial areas. These include logistics, maintenance, heavy airlift, aerial refueling, and, as mentioned earlier, pilot training and the ability to produce indigenous aircraft. Due to these factors, the PLAAF does not present a credible offensive threat to the U.S. or China's Asian neighbors.⁴⁰ "If anything, the PLAAF's overall capabilities relative to most of its potential rivals will diminish over the next 10 years."⁴¹

Despite these serious problems, the PLAAF is attempting to modernize. It has purchased about 150 Su-27SMK fighters, 50 Su-30Mk multi-role combat aircraft and 10 IL-76TD heavy transport aircraft from Russia.⁴² They are also attempting to build, through joint ventures, the FC-1 lightweight fighter (based on the Russian MiG-33) and a multi-role fighter the J-10.⁴³ However, experts believe that attempts to build these new aircraft will meet with extremely limited success and take over a decade to accomplish. Both purchased and indigenously produced aircraft will undoubtedly run up against the same problems that the current fleet experiences namely logistical, maintenance, pilot training and aerial refueling problems.

U.S. Strategy Considerations: PLAAF modernization efforts and the resultant capabilities which will come to fruition over the next 15 to 20 years, do not pose a credible threat to U.S. forces. Warplanners should consider this when developing warplans for the China AOR. The United States' ability to gain air supremacy over mainland China would be a major blow to any attempt by China to forcefully take Taiwan. The destruction of Chinese naval vessels and port facilities, through the use of U.S. air power, could realistically stop an attack dead in its tracks.

Since most technically advanced Chinese aircraft rely on foreign made parts, planners should also consider the effect that curtailing these supply lines would have on the PLAAF. How long would this action need to continue before the more advanced, jointly built aircraft are put out of action?

Pilot training appears to be so poor that the best course of action may be to simply shoot down Chinese aircraft in much the same way as the U.S. Air Force did in the Gulf War. However, it must be kept in mind that the Chinese have a capable integrated air defense network over the mainland and to some extent over their more modern ships. Planners should understand how this air defense system works and how it can be most effectively defeated.

Conclusion

The goals of China are changing significantly as it gains the economic power to make expansionism appear realistic. China now understands that in order to share in superpower status it must begin to project its military power and dominate the land and people within its region. Considering the significant economic gains that China made over the last decade, its newly established goals are realistic in the long term.

China has begun to take the first steps toward bringing its goals to fruition by making several major changes in its military doctrine. This new doctrine (WUHTC) is intended to change the Chinese military's perspective from a continental strategy dependent upon the Chinese masses to a maritime strategy focused on high technology weapons. The goal of this doctrine is to transform the Chinese military organization into a force capable of fighting in the high-tech style demonstrated by the United States in the Gulf War. The Chinese appear to be committed to accomplishing this goal as demonstrated by their prioritizing the task of modernization above that of homeland defense.

The transformation from low-tech, manpower intensive warfare to a high-tech, weapons intensive military warfare is an extremely complex task. The Chinese have many obstacles to overcome. Key among these is developing the ability to produce high-tech equipment indigenously. It would appear that developing this capability would lead to the resolution of some of the other problems that the Chinese now face in operating high-tech equipment. These problems include poor logistics, maintenance, and training.

The sum of the effects of recent PLA modernization has been minimal. This has resulted in a low level of threat to U.S. forces. However, over the next twenty to thirty years, this threat can be expected to grow into at least a medium level threat within the second island chain, and possibly a high level threat within the first island chain. It should also be noted that China currently possesses the ability to conduct asymmetrical attacks on the U.S. Navy using its naval air and surface assets. These platforms, equipped with a small number of high-tech weapons such as Exocet missiles, could do

significant damage to an unprepared U.S Navy. China's submarine force, led by its four Russian built Kilo submarines, would contribute to asymmetrical warfare as well.

U.S. warplanners should carefully consider the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese modernization program. The major strengths consist of the growing Chinese economy and Chinese willingness to accept risk and focus on modernization as their top priority. However, there are a number of important weaknesses which U.S. planners should attempt to exploit. Among the PLA's weaknesses are its predictable doctrine, vulnerability to outside threat, poor state of readiness, and the relative inability of the Chinese to produce and maintain high-tech weaponry. These weaknesses prevent China from posing a major, near-term threat to the region or to U.S. forces. However, China clearly understands the importance of making corrections and has refocused its modernization efforts to this end. U.S. planners must also make adjustments. Understanding Chinese goals, and their relationship to China's modernization programs, is essential to U.S. warplanners accurately predicting the evolution of the Chinese threat and shaping an effective U.S. response.

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³ Brad Kaplan, "China's Navy Today: Storm Clouds on the Horizon . . . or Paper Tiger?," *Sea Power*, (December 1999): 29.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dreyer, *China's Strategic View*, 1.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Zhang Zhen, "China Changes Its Strategic Mindset – Part One," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol 11, Issue 11(Nov 1999): 4.

⁹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁰ Viacheslav A. Frolov, "China's Armed Forces Prepare for High-Tech Warfare," *Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy*, (Jan 1998): 1.

¹¹ Zhang Zhen, *China Changes*, 6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ United States Department of Defense, *Future Military Capabilities*, 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶ It is noteworthy that many Americans believe that the United States military should be making the same bold move.

¹⁷ This is very similar to the problems the United States Army has experienced. Armies, as opposed to navies and air forces, seem to be caught in a technological void. Current

technology is best leveraged on large mobile platforms like ships, missiles and aircraft. Technology which will be sufficiently miniaturized so as to be of major benefit to the ground soldier is still at least a generation away. This reality tends to pull funding away from armies worldwide.

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¹⁹ Ibid.

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²¹ Dreyer, *China's Strategic View*. 12.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

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²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Kaplan, *China's Navy Today*, 29.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 32.

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³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 33.

³⁶ Sengupta, *PLA Force Modernisation*, 24.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dreyer, *China's Strategic View*. 13.

³⁹ Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power*, (New York, 1995), 382.

⁴⁰ Sengupta, *PLA Force Modernisation*, 24.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dreyer, *China's Strategic View*. 8-9.